

THE WORK OF WOMEN ON HOSPITAL BOARDS *

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It is a remarkable sign of the times that the public is gradually waking up to a sense of the value of organized and official, as compared with amateurish and dilettante, service from the women of this country. The old-fashioned sentiment that the deeper a woman buried any talent she might possess, and the more closely she wrapped it up in a napkin, the better she fulfilled her destiny, and the more womanly she was, is fast dying out; and the warning against allowing *any* talent to lie unused is more generally accepted as applying equally to women and to men. It is well that it is so, for the world has need of every ounce of talent it contains. Is there amongst men such a superabundance of public spirit, of devotion to the public service, of willingness to sacrifice private interests to public, coupled with general organizing power and ability, that the State and public boards can afford to do without any that are possessed by women?

The general qualifications of women to serve on hospital or other boards are precisely the same as those of men, although each has valuable special experience which the other has not, and which would be lost without the services of both. Many thoughtful people recognize this. Full recognition cannot be hoped for till the citizenship of women is put on a sure basis by the bestowal upon them of their just right to a Parliamentary vote, the want of which is at the root of a vast waste of accumulated power.

Without experience and training, neither men nor women can give of their best. As a guide to preliminary training may I commend to the notice of those of you who have not already read it a careful study of that wonderful little book of Baden-Powell's on "Scouting," which contains texts for many sermons? Read the book, and you will recognize what I mean. Carry out its precepts in your daily life, and your usefulness for all time coming in both public and private life will be sensibly increased.

I think I may most profitably spend the few minutes which the committee of the National Union of Women Workers have honored me in putting at my disposal by calling attention to some of the matters which might, in my opinion, with advantage claim the attention of women members of hospital boards. The efficient ordering of the domes-

* Read before the National Union of Women Workers.

tic arrangements of a hospital, large or small, require the same kind of knowledge, experience, and organizing power required for a well-ordered private house. I have therefore no sympathy with a frequently expressed idea that women members are wanted in the interests of women and children only. Men need their services also. The ideal household has a woman as well as a man at the head of it—those of widowers not being specially distinguished for comfort.

The dietary of hospital patients must naturally be fixed by the physicians and surgeons in charge, but they cannot be expected, except in cases of very serious illness, to pay attention to the quality of the food and the manner of cooking and serving it. Variety of food is important for the officials, nurses, and general staff of a hospital, and this cannot be secured without much thought and care. In all such matters competent women managers should accept a full share of responsibility. The kitchen employees will do their work all the better if they know that some of the authorities are taking an intelligent interest in its results. The same thing applies to the laundry, the linenry, and the clothing departments. The officials connected with them are entitled to all the help which the knowledge and experience of women members are able to supply. Every worker, every one of us, is none the worse of a little criticism of our work from some one who thoroughly understands although not actually engaged in doing it. It has been said that such matters may fittingly be left in the hands of an outside Ladies' Committee. Of this I most strongly disapprove, as I deprecate the assumption of responsibility without power.*

Nursing and the training of nurses have been so much in the public mind of late in connection with our sick and wounded soldiers that I think this a fitting opportunity to urge all women members of hospital boards to make diligent study of the whole question. Although since the days of Mrs. Gamp what may be called a revolution has taken place in nursing matters, I have no hesitation in saying that a great deal of chaos still exists which must be reduced to order if the public generally are to derive the utmost attainable benefit from the services of thoroughly trained nurses. The greatest diversity of opinion exists as to what this means. More recognition of the principle of development in the science and practice of nursing is desirable. There is, as yet, no

* No one knows better than I do that in order to the efficient working of a hospital the lady superintendent or matron must have concentrated authority in her own department. That power, however, ought not to be autocratic. No human being, man or woman, is fit to be an autocrat. Her rule should be monarchical, but it should be a limited monarchy—all important decisions and appointments being reported to a committee of the Board of Management, on which the women members would naturally have a seat.

recognized, accepted, general standard of attainment for certificated nurses corresponding, for example, to that for teachers or university students. A teacher who holds a diploma or a student who has taken a university degree must have followed a fixed minimum course of training, the value of which and the subjects of which anyone who takes the trouble to inquire may easily ascertain. Such knowledge is especially valuable with regard to medical degrees. Nurses, however well trained, however efficient, physically, mentally, and morally, will never obtain either the position or the pay to which the best are entitled until the public have the means of differentiating between the good and the bad, between those claiming high pay and those claiming lower, by some other means than pleasant or painful experience, as the case may be, in times of sickness and distress.

After much consideration, I have come to the conclusion that the remedy for the present unsatisfactory state of matters will be found in a comprehensive system of State registration for nurses. This in the interests of the State, of the general public, of all hospital and private patients, and of the nurses themselves. To formulate such a system will require the help of the very best of those women who have knowledge and experience of nursing matters. It must, as I said, be comprehensive, must not be grown in a mould, but be planted like a tree and allowed to develop in the sunshine of good mental and moral influences. Examination for admission to each register should be *pass*, and not competitive, and should be entrusted to some extent to nurses of position and experience. Pending registration, every hospital certificate should set forth the duration of each branch of training given, so that employers may be able to judge if a nurse has had the experience qualifying her to undertake the care of any special case.

Women who aspire to be nurses of the first rank must, I think, begin earlier than is at present customary to learn their work. There is difference of opinion as to the age at which a woman should enter the wards of a hospital for training. I think you will all agree that if that age is twenty-four or twenty-five, a year or two could be most profitably spent in preparatory study. There are many things which can only be learned in the wards of a hospital, but there are others which can equally well be learned outside. I know of two hospitals—one in Scotland and one in England (there may be others)—where systems of preliminary training and examinations have been adopted with the best possible results. The survival of the fittest is insured, to the immense advantage of the patients, who are thus delivered from the feckless ministrations of ignorant and incompetent probationers. I would have every candidate for hospital training attend lectures on elementary physiology, anatomy, and

hygiene, and courses of practice and demonstration cookery lessons, before she sets foot in a hospital ward. She should also attend lectures on general nursing, learning, amongst other things, how to make and apply poultices and fomentations, to make and apply bandages, to take temperatures, and to make the beds and change the sheets of helpless patients. With such previous knowledge, her power to profit by ward training would be increased tenfold. No one need fear that better education would tempt nurses to forget their position and to assume responsibility which belongs to the physician. It is the little knowledge that puffeth up, and the more thoroughly trained a nurse is, the more clearly does she recognize where her duty and responsibility end. A good nurse must be something more than a nurse, and ought to be able to think about other things. Women managers must see to it that the nurses' hours are not too long, and that the terms of night duty are not unduly protracted. In some hospitals—I am glad to say they are few—the night nurses are kept on duty for a consecutive period of eleven months. For many this is an undue and unnecessary strain.

A suggestion has been made, and has been received with favor, that this country should have a corps of reserve among nurses numbering one thousand members. Judging from this last year's experience, it is not too many. It lies with women members of hospital boards to co-operate with hospital matrons in seeing that their training shall be of the best, and that they shall have experience of fever, as well as of ordinary medical and surgical cases.

For all the impression that the magnificent services of Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War have made on the army medical authorities of this country as to what the knowledge and experience of women can accomplish, it might be imagined that they had never even heard of her and of her work. The United States of America have recognized the importance of her services to our army, and a woman has been or is to be appointed under the chief of the War Department Medical Bureau who is to be responsible for all arrangements for the nursing of the soldiers in time of war. With us things work slowly, and the minds of men are not yet accustomed to this idea. We who believe that women know more about nursing than men must take the responsibility of educating the authorities on the subject, bearing ever in mind the dictum of Thomas Carlyle that "the only rhetorical figure which is worth anything for purposes of persuasion is the great figure of repetition."